The Potentialities of Space Commoning
The Capacity to Act and Think through Space

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Concrete social realities have their spaces. They unfold in and through space. It is by interacting with spatial attributes and characteristics that the experience of individuals and groups unfolds. If every society reproduces itself by reproducing the habits and structural relations of its members, then the regulating of shared experiences is among the most powerful means to pursue this goal. Spatial arrangements, however, are more than containers of social life and shared experiences. Spatial arrangements interact with social experiences both by giving them concrete context and by supporting representations of those experiences, which actually make them sharable.

By being an active co-producer of social life and of the experiences that characterize it, space becomes a powerful means to control the distribution of the sensible. Let us remember Jacques Rancière's definition: 'I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.'[1] This process actually channels sense perception to socially imposed patterns that are connected with meaningful representations of the social world. The perception of spatial forms and characteristics is part of this kind of social ordering. The normalization process, which lies at the foundations of social ordering, tries to ensure that future experiences will be shaped according to deeply embedded 'dispositions', a term Bourdieu uses to describe the results of socially inculcated tacit knowledge.[2]

However, what makes space a means to control both the shared experiences and their representations, gives space the power to shape *possible experiences*. A way of exploring this power is by thinking-in-images.[3] In this case, the power to construct representations of social life through spatial qualities is used to project elements of possible social worlds through thought-images of possible spaces of social life. We know, of course, that the history of utopias is a history of utopian sites, utopian worlds, utopian cities and utopian spaces, in many cases envisaged, depicted or narrated in the greatest of detail. What distinguishes thinking-in-images from this history of utopian spatial projections is the fact that thought-images can be hybrid combinations of thoughts about a possible future and of spatial relations related to this future (conceived diagrammatically

rather than in full imagistic detail). The term, which originated in the writing of the Frankfurt School theorists (Benjamin, Adorno, Bloch, and Kracauer), 'self-consciously exposes the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative'.[4] Thought-images, thus, do not offer (or seek to construct) depictions of a possible future but rather shape arguments about the future developed through the processing of images. Here lies the emancipatory potential of this process: A possible emancipatory future is connected to both the concreteness of available shared experiences and to their shared representations, as well as to that abstract generalizing reasoning that learns from such experiences and representations (and does not use them merely as examples or illustrations).

If emancipation has to do with the envisioning and testing of specific forms of social organization, possible spaces (understood as imagined arrangements or as specific possible sites) may become the means of both envisioning and testing those forms. Space, concrete and relational, abstract and specific is truly connected to a crucial human capacity: to understand experience and imagine the world through arrangements of objects and subjects. Through space and spatial attributes (for instance, distance) humans make their experiences meaningful but they also long to reach beyond what they face as reality.

A comparison with the capacity of language may be instructive. This capacity is considered to be innate: Humans may produce language as part of their species-specific armature for survival.[5] Language, thus, may take different forms in different historical periods but also different levels of this capacity are being reached by different individuals in different language communities. In all cases, however, language is an area of potentiality. To use Paolo Virno's suggestion, linguistic potentiality is never exhausted in the specific utterance or 'speech act' that is actualized in different contingencies. Potential becomes the measure of what actually exists (in the case of language of what is uttered) but it is also the very precondition of going beyond it.[6]

What seems to be common to P. Virno and Giorgio Agamben is an effort to rescue human capacities from their direct exploitation by current capitalism, which they consider not merely as a distinct production system but also as a form of government based on biopolitics. They both focus on language as the most important human capacity, which connects and even directs all

the other capacities. And it is language, according to both, that is completely instrumentalized in contemporary work relations and production relations as a generic ability that all humans can employ. Actually, it is language, instrumentalized in the form of an all-pervasive communicability, which subordinates human communication to productive work (through information and tele-communication technologies) and to the shaping of consumption habits (especially through the mass media as well as the social media). Thus, according to Agamben,

> [I]n the society of the spectacle, it is this very communicativity [the communicative essence of human beings], this generic essence itself (that is language as *Gattungswesen*), that is being separated in an autonomous sphere. What prevents communication is communicability itself.[7]

For Agamben, to reclaim human capacities from direct capitalist exploitation, to restore communication as the ground of human community means to restore the potentiality inherent to those capacities. Drawing heavily from Aristotle's problematization of potentiality (*dynamis*), Agamben suggests that potentiality is not and should not be reduced to its actualizations. For the 'coming community'[8] to be different from existing forms of social organization, which are based on 'belonging' and on identity categorizations and hierarchies, we need to restore potentiality as the basis of the common. 'We need to secure a pure potentiality that does not pass over into actuality.'[9] 'We need to think man ... as a being of pure potentiality (*potenza*) that no identity and no work could exhaust.'[10]

Pure potentiality becomes the power of means, the power of mediality, once it is released from its necessary connection to specific social ends, or, more specifically, once it is released from actuality as potentiality's necessary outcome. Politics, thus, becomes for Agamben 'the sphere of pure means',[11] 'the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought'.[12]

It is in such a prospect that potentiality will become the common denominator of shared life in a 'coming community'. Singularities will be shaped in 'forms-of-life', in ways of living in which 'mediality' (form considered as means without end) is to become the only distinguishing factor.

What is at stake then, is a life in which the single ways, acts and processes of living are never simply facts [therefore imprints for governance and rule making] but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all potentiality (*potenza*).[13]

The capacity to produce spaces and to think through spaces is indeed a human capacity which, as language, is never reducible to concrete social realities. This capacity corresponds to a potentiality that transcends any actual social reality. Virno believes that what he names as 'potentials' 'attest to human beings' poverty of instinct, undefined nature, and characteristic constant disorientation'.[14] Stressing the importance of human disorientation as the condition of human life he insists: 'Potential is intimately connected to disorientation',[15] which results from the 'lack of a pre-given environment in which we can take an innately secure place once and for all time'.[16] Following a different reasoning, Agamben comes to a conclusion that can be considered as similar. For him, man 'appears as the living being that has no work, that is, the living being that has no specific nature and vocation'.[17]

However, the capacity to think and act by employing spatial attributes and spatial denominators (such as, for example distance, height, and so on) cannot be rescued from its instrumentalization in capitalist society the way Agamben seems to suggest in referring to language and life (life as form). Pure potentiality in terms of space will mean an absolute emphasis on the mediality of space completely cut off from any of its concretizations in lived human environments. Reduced to a means without end, space will be closer to the abstract space of capitalist production, which is so severely condemned as alienating by H. Lefebvre.[18]

True, we can compare this abstract 'spaceness' of space to the pure communicability that destroys communication, which Agamben links to the conditions of capitalist exploitation of human capacities. And we may assume that Agamben's 'sphere of pure means' is not a sphere separated from the rest of social life (the way communicability is in capitalism, resulting in the emptying of its human potentiality) but indeed the centre of a coming community life.

However, space as capacity is developed through experiences of actual spatial arrangements. The power to think beyond those actual arrangements and their material existence is

developed from within those experiences. Thus, we may retain the effort to keep open the potentialities related to this capacity only if we continuously open possibilities to experience different actual spaces. The actualization of spatial potentialities further opens the field of potentialization.

Spaces, concrete lived spaces, are works (the result of labour), but also the means to shape possible future worlds. If we connect this perspective with Lefebvre's idea that the city is the collective 'oeuvre' of its habitants,[19] then the potentialization of space is always the result of commoning, of sharing aspirations but also of working together, of working in common. Lived spaces are shaped through human interactions that develop shared worlds. To potentialize those shared worlds, which means to challenge their meaning and their power to present the distribution of the sensible as an indisputable order of life, people have to activate the potentialities of commoning. And this essentially amounts to the liberation of commoning from capitalist command.

Agamben thinks that in the feast 'what is done—which in itself is not unlike one does every day—becomes undone, is rendered inoperative liberated and suspended from its "economy"',[20] Similarly, dance is the 'liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements' and the poem is rendering language inoperative, 'in deactivating its communicative and informative function in order to open it to a new possible use'.[21] In all those cases, it seems, potentiality is really experienced as the expansion of the field of the possible because there exist human movements that are not dance and because there is a variety of human discourses (human interactions through language) that are not poetic. 'Inoperativity' in this context defines a describable externality, although the boundaries between the poetic and the non-poetic (as well as those between dance and everyday gestures) are socially marked. The potentialization of everyday gestures, everyday language or everyday acts of survival does not happen, however, because we become able to render them inoperative but, rather, because the externality of dance, poetry, and feast, respectively, is only relative in terms of history: It is by contaminating everyday normality that art or collective joy may transform it. Potentialization is a dynamic, contingent process that transforms habits and not the restoration of an unpolluted, ontologically different beyond.

Possible Spaces

Thus, to think about space as potentiality is to connect experiences of space to possibilities of expanding them and transcending them. To explore the potentialities of space is to explore the potentialities of spatial relations and the ways those relations may happen. Materiality is not merely an aspect of the actualization of spatial potentialities in a specific context but an essential constituent of the potentiality of space.

Space becomes potential when it is performed. And performance is not only a process of repetition, of normalization based on spatially acquired dispositions. Performing space, performing through space, is always open to discovering space through performance, much like a dancer discovers possible movements by dancing and an actor possible gestures by acting or by rehearsing. By performing space we may transform actually existing spaces. Performing space actually means performing social relations, it means experiencing them as concrete unfolding realities, rather than as abstract definitions of social identities. And this is a way to live potentiality by creating it.

Maybe 'what is at issue in Agamben's thinking of potentiality is simply and intensely creation – creation in its most radical form, a form that, to truly create, must make the complete of the dictated incomplete, must grasp decreation'.[22] Creation, however, may become the substratum of a multiple process of displacements and experiments that unfold in a myriad of ways in everyday practices as well as in moments of rupture. Creation, thus, is both mundane and heroic, as is the process of potentializing space. Rendering space inoperative is no way of discovering possible spaces. Destroying the instrumentalization of space imposed by capitalist governance may possibly become the motor of the potentialization of space. But this is something that is necessarily exposed to the messy contradictions of lived reality.

One can even go further in challenging the emancipating promise of pure potentiality: Potentiality should never be reduced to the actual only because the actual always feeds potentiality. To go beyond what exists we need to use the experiences and thoughts that are born in what exists and struggle to transcend it.

Spatial capacity, the faculty to perceive through spatial attributes and to think through spatial attributes, can be said to be part of the ability of humans to create their own history, to be members of societies unfolding in history. This capacity shapes

specific spaces but also may support the projection into future possible spaces of experiences that unfold in the present. In Virno's theory the process through which potentials shape the present is not equated to actualization. For him potential is pre-historical and non-chronological.[23] It 'is the unrealized past against which the living measures itself while it lives'.[24] Potential, thus, cannot be connected to a certain moment in the past but it can be evoked by memory as that which measures the present. Potential always remains 'unrealized' but for this reason we can say that it gives meaning and attributes value to actual experiences.

It is interesting to observe how Virno treats Benjamin's approach to the past. Benjamin's theory on history is based on the idea that historical time is full of discontinuities and ruptures and, therefore, a narrative reconstruction of the past is only illusionary and mythologizing,[25] Moreover, such a narrative approach is essentially part of the mythology of continuous progress, which, transposed to politics, legitimizes a social-democratic view of social change as gradual and linear.[26] Ruptures indicate, for Benjamin, moments that reveal potentialities. Unrealized potentialities in the past can provide us with a knowledge that is crucial for the present: How to pursue a different future, an emancipatory future, by taking advantage of potentialities that were not followed in the past. By trying to win where others have lost.[27]

This approach to potentiality, to the potential, according to Virno, needs to be supplemented by an interpretation of the present's relation to potential. It is because the 'present moment itself entails the past-in-general – potential – as one of its intrinsic component',[28] that the present can be connected to a specific past and thus become meaningful in the prospect of social change. Potential makes the historical past a dynamic challenge for the future. Potential keeps the past as an unresolved pendency in the present.

There is something very useful here for a possible theory of the potentialities of space (or for space as part of the potential): If past and present experiences, shared (and thus socialized) through representations, actually provide people with the means to construct possible visions of a different future, then it is important to see the past not as a finished and fully describable reality but as a propelling force for the discovery of potentialities in the present. Re-activating the past, thus, might mean using, among other ways, images of the past, spatial configurations of past experiences, in order to discover in them potential spaces and potential spatialities. In the process of printing the images of the past with the powerful developing solutions of the present (an image that allures to a technology of image printing made obsolete by contemporary xerography), spatial characteristics acquire new meanings, appear in a new light, and are being transformed or possibly distorted (but, of course, an initial 'authentic' form of space is just as imaginary as any of its projections). To put it in different words: To see spaces of the past as opportunities to rethink what may change or what should change, necessarily entails the capacity to think through space, to construct possible spatialities.

Considering space then, as a capacity to experience and to think of different forms of social organization, links space to the project of social emancipation. This does not amount to reiterating that new societies need new spaces. Emancipated societies, societies in which human emancipation unfolds, produce and need new spatialities, new ways, that is, to understand and employ space as a crucial factor of shaping human relations. Spatial potentialities support creative explorations of possible human relations.

Space and Prefigurative Politics

By focusing on space as potentiality and by acknowledging the capacity to think and act through space as a crucial human capacity we can reformulate the problem of prefiguration and prefigurative politics. The simple and historically most enduring way to conceive of prefigurative politics is as those practices in which means reflect (mirror, look like) the ends. In prefigurative politics, visions of a different society are supposed to shape struggles to establish such a society according to the same values that support these visions.[29] There is of course an important problem that makes the comparison between means and ends highly precarious. We experience acts as they unfold in time. And we can connect them to scopes either judging by ourselves or by taking into account words or other forms of expression that are used by the subjects of those acts to explain what they aim at. There is, however, an unbridgeable gap between words and deeds, scopes and acts, discourses and practices. Actually, what we try to compare cannot really be compared.

We can observe and judge acts (including the performance status of enunciations) but scopes we have to infer. And words that declare scopes merely do that: declare. Shouldn't we then say

that acts reveal (according of course to an interpretative stance) scopes rather than pre-figure them? Shouldn't we realize that acts (including enunciating acts) may indeed be considered as means to accomplish something but that ends can only be inferred? And, surely, results of actions do not necessarily establish (let alone 'prove') the scopes of those actions.

J. Holloway, in his subtle definition of prefigurative struggles, suggests an interesting way out of this conceptual impasse. A 'consciously prefigurative' struggle 'aims, in its form, not to reproduce the structures and practices of that which is struggled against, but rather to create the sort of social relations which are desired'.[30] By talking about the 'form' of struggle, Holloway may try to show that means can be considered as forms rather than as concrete realities, the way the realities of acts are. Focusing on the formal aspect of acts may establish a common ground between acts and scopes. What need to be compared are, thus, not acts and scopes but the forms of acts and the form of scopes. Values in both acts and scopes can, therefore, be connected to their forms through which they are embedded in social relations. And what seems to differentiate those forms is power. It is because power relations take different forms that we can distinguish between different forms of relations between people. A certain society's members enter into differentiated social relations because of an overall arrangement of power distribution that characterizes this specific society.

Direct democracy and horizontality are forms of relations that construct modes of social organization based on the values of equality. Specific ways of distributing and controlling power are developed in the spatio-historical context of groups or societies that establish such relations. And, of course, those ways are being developed in time: Forms characterize relations but in a way that is open to the historicity of struggles – forms are open to transformation. Prefiguration is actually being performed and prefigurative practices do not prefigure a future condition but actually prefigure a future process by unfolding as a process.

Commenting on the prefigurative politics of alter-globalization movement, M. Maeckelbergh seems to suggest exactly this. Namely, that this movement was not creating 'a prefiguration of an ideal society or type of community or abstract political ideology … [but] … a prefiguration of a process, a prefiguration of a

horizontal decentralized democracy, which is at once a goal and current practice of the movement'.[31]

Returning to space as capacity: Spaces can be pre-figurative because they can show possible arrangements of social relations by way of analogy: Spaces do not simply illustrate or represent social relations that may inhabit them, spaces contribute in the shaping of those social relations. It is because space is both a medium (analogically able to show possible new ways on inhabiting) and also part of the projected future, that space can prefigure and materialize, at the same time, a different social condition.

This gives the shared capacity to use space the power to contribute to prefigurative politics by destroying the considered as indisputable polarity between means and ends. In actual spaces. people can experience the future and the means to reach it. Space, when it becomes enmeshed in prefigurative politics, is both experienced and potential, an actual materiality of arrangements and a dynamic construction of possible human relations that unfold in the present. Space as potential is more like a testing ground for the future: through real-time experiments parts of the future are brought to the present.

Space acquires its relational power, its power therefore to become a medium but also an aspect of social relations, through the shaping of its form: Space-as-form is connected in three ways in social life. Thus, space-as-form connects to social organization (form-as-organization), to the expression of social values and meaning (form-as-expression), and to the processes of labour and technology (form-as-materialization).[32]

It is because space is shaped as form through social practices that space may be potentialized in prefigurative politics. Space is part of social life and not a way to establish a pure externality to life as it unfolds in a certain society. This is why space may be experienced and thought as both an external and an internal reality when it is part of prefigurative politics. 'Pre-' does not exactly describe its status in terms of time: (pre)figurative spaces unfold on multiple levels of temporality—they may connect actual and remembered experiences with aspirations and dreams. And this multivalence of practices may happen during the process in which space is actually produced in action.

An activist fighting for indigenous rights in Mexican Chiapas is actually juxtaposing different temporalities in spaces that are potentialized through collective actions of resistance:

A remembered space of community, a sought-for space for indigenous autonomy, and an experienced space of everyday struggle are co-present in *territorio Zapatista* (Zapatista territory). 'Alternative social rationalities'[33] emerge in Zapatista communities as new forms of social organization and government are being tried out. This is a process that sustains dissident ways of practicing politics aimed at emancipatory changes, which are developed against dominant neoliberal policies of discrimination and 'expulsion'.[34] 'We might best characterize the Zapatista strategy, then, as the construction of another structure of relation between a newly produced collective subject and space – a new "territoriality..."'.[35] Zapatista territory, thus, does not exist outside the capitalist Mexican state and the global flows that shape it. Zapatista territory emerges as an unfolding potentialization of dominant spatial relations in an effort to create expansive networks of commoning and self-governance. This is the meaning of Zapatista autonomy, which is clearly distinguished from the declared autonomy of whatever state.

Prefigurative power is a propelling force for spatial figuration, which happens in the re-configuration of space. In search for possible spaces and practices of emancipation, we need to potentialize existing spaces and to potentialize existing practices, which amounts to an inventive re-appropriation of the power of commoning.

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Notes

1   Rancière 2006, p. 12. See also Rancière 2010, p. 36.
2   Bourdieu 1977 and Bourdieu 2000.
3   Stavrides 2016a, pp. 209–227.
4   Richter 2007, p. 25.
5   Virno 2009, pp. 98–99.
6   Virno 2015, pp. 23–26.
7   Agamben 2000, p. 84.
8   Agamben 1993.
9   Braun 2013, p. 174.
10 Agamben 2014, p. 69.
11 Agamben 2000, p. 60.
12 Ibid., p. 117.
13 Agamben 2014, p. 73.
14 Virno 2015, p. 87.
15 Ibid., p. 88.
16 Ibid, author's italics.
17 Agamben 2007, p. 2.
18 See Lefebvre's discussion on 'abstract space' in Lefebvre 1991, pp. 50–53.
19 Lefebvre 1996, pp. 173–174.
20 Agamben 2014, p. 69.
21 Ibid., p. 70.
22 Deladurantaye 2000, p. 22.
23 Virno 2015, p. 186–187.
24 Ibid., p. 120.
25 Benjamin 1992, p. 255.
26 Ibid., p. 252.
27 Ibid., p. 247.
28 Virno 2015, p. 144 note.
29 See Breines 1982, a work in which the term prefigurative politics was introduced, and Van de Sande 2017.
30 Holloway 2002, p. 153–154.
31 Quoted in Van de Sande 2013, p. 232.
32 Stavrides 2016, p. 82.
33 Porto-Gonçalves and Leff 2015, p. 86.
34 Sassen 2014.
35 Reyes 2015, p. 421.

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